

History of *Hawai‘i Volcanoes National Park*

National Park Service
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Hawai‘i Volcanoes National Park
Hawai‘i



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By Dwight Hamilton

Because the eruptions of Hawaiian volcanoes are gentler than those of most other volcanoes around the world, the edges of the active vents are frequently accessible, allowing people to come pay their respects to Pele. The early Hawaiian revered her and made offerings to placate her wrath. Missionaries William Ellis and Asa Thurston visited Kīlauea’s boiling lake of lava in 1823, the first Westerners to do so. Pele’s fiery lake was described in magazines of the day, and adventuresome travelers came to see it firsthand. Mark Twain, on seeing Kīlauea in 1866, enthusiastically wrote, “Here was room for the imagination to work!”

Lorrin Thurston, publisher of the Honolulu Pacific Commercial Advertiser at the turn of the century, loved to explore the volcano lands. Among his discoveries was a giant lava tube, formed when a river of hot lava cooled and crusted over and the still-molten interior continued to flow downhill. Eventually, the lava drained out, leaving a cave-like shell. The Thurston Lava Tube (Nāhuku) is a major attraction on Crater Rim Drive.

In 1906, Thurston began a campaign to make this amazing area into a public park. His efforts were not effective until he was joined in 1912 by Dr. Thomas A. Jaggar, who came to the islands to establish and serve as director of the Hawaiian Volcano Observatory. Together, the two conservationists collared politicians, wrote editorials, and promoted the idea of making the volcanoes into a national park in what was then the Territory of Hawai‘i.

On August 1, 1916, President Woodrow Wilson signed the country’s 13th national park into existence. It had taken 10 years, but the perseverance of Thurston and Jaggar paid off.

At first, the park consisted of only the summits of Kīlauea and Mauna Loa on Hawai‘i Island and Haleakalā on Maui. Eventually, Kīlauea Caldera was added to the park, followed by the forests of Mauna Loa, the Ka‘ū Desert (the site of ancient warrior footprints set in ash), the rainforest of Ola‘a, and the Kalapana archaeological area of the Puna/Ka‘ū Historic District.

In 1961, Haleakalā was made a separate national park. Today, Hawai‘i Volcanoes National Park protects 520 square miles of the island’s volcanic wonders and is a refuge for surviving native plants and animals.

In 1980, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural organization (UNESCO) named Hawai‘i Volcanoes National Park an International Biosphere Reserve because of its outstanding scenic and scientific values. The park was recognized for its important volcanic sites (including two of the world’s most active volcanoes); and its volcanic island ecosystem, which preserves one of the largest significant ecosystems on the Hawaiian Islands; and its cultural and historic sites. The Biosphere Reserve program goals are to conserve the diversity of a designated site’s ecosystems and provide areas and facilities for international ecological and environmental research, education and training.

Hawai‘i Volcanoes National Park was named a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1987. World Heritage sites recognize and protect areas around the globe that have outstanding natural, historical, and cultural values. It evolved from the idea that certain natural and cultural sites have “universal value” for all people.